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AUTHOR Kevin, Ryan; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of a survey of beginning teachers who were asked to evaluate their training for the profession in the light of their first year of actual experience. Eighteen teachers were observed and interviewed throughout their first year of teaching. Two themes emerged from their responses: a realization of the limits of teaching programs, and a valuing of firsthand experiences. The majority of these teachers expressed the opinion that field-based experience while in school was of great value. (JD)

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# "My Teacher Education Program? Well---"

## First Year Teachers Reflect and React

Kevin Ryan

Jane Applegate
V. Randall Flora
John Johnston
Thomas Lasley
Gerald Mager
Katherine Newman

The Ohio State University
College of Education

118 Arps Hall
1945 North High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43210

SP012 231

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"Ellen, do you think your teacher education program prepared you for the real world?"

"No. The only way you can learn to teach is by teaching. No one can prepare you for those awful tremors you feel when you face thirty kids and you have to control them. I don't think you could be really prepared unless you knew where you would be teaching."

. . .

"Dave, it sounds as if you didn't expect much from your teacher education program?"

"Yeah. I don't know. You hate to put down the school that you went to in the first place. I do think the Education Department in my school was a good one. I'm not saying that any of them are great. There's so much in education courses now that is just sort of a development of feelings and personal philosophies, things like that--which is all well and good, but... There should be certain things that you learn, a real body of material which you can deal with, get your teeth into. It doesn't do any good to just sit there and talk about, 'Well, I think - -' unless you have knowledge of some substance, of ideas that have come before."

. . .

"And, Sandy, how was your teacher education program?"

"Excellent. Just excellent."

. . .

The First Year Teacher Study

New teachers come to teaching armed with the knowledge and experience gained from their college or university preparation. They have watched teachers teaching since they began school but they have had few opportunities to be Teacher. The first year of teaching is viewed as a testing ground for their aspirations and their training; new teachers want

to succeed, to be good at what they do. They expect teaching to be challenging and they expect that because they have passed the rigors of preparation and have earned certification, they will be able to meet the demands of the profession. The first year of teaching is crucial in shaping attitudes and feelings about their teacher education experiences of years past, and it may also form their expectations for their future teaching careers.

How do new teachers view their teacher education programs? How well do they feel their programs prepared them for classroom teaching? To what extent did teacher preparation influence their teaching and their thoughts about teaching? These questions and many others were asked throughout a school year to new teachers who were part of The First Year Teacher Study, a field study in which seven researchers observed and interviewed eighteen teachers throughout their first year.

The purpose of the study was to describe the life-space of the first year teacher. Specifically, the study focused upon the new teachers' perceptions of what was happening to them as they began their careers. The new teachers, twelve women and six men, taught in sixteen different urban, suburban, and rural schools in the central Ohio area. They were products of eleven different colleges and universities and nine different teacher preparation programs. They were interviewed at length five times during the school year. The initial questions were developed from a number of sources, and as the year progressed, subsequent interview questions were based upon recurrent themes or issues which emerged from the researchers' observations of the new teachers.

In addition to the structured interviews, the teachers were observed for one hour twice a week during the first four weeks, and two to four times per month thereafter. They were often contacted by phone in the evening. Periodically, they were asked to respond to written questionnaires and other instruments.

The teachers' reflections and reactions to their preparation was but one strand of inquiry followed throughout the year. The study did not attempt to describe or explain each of the different types of preparation each teacher received. Rather, the research focused upon the teachers' perceptions of the value of their programs. The data were treated as belonging to individual cases, not to an aggregate of "first year teacher." What we have discovered speaks more to the unique experiences of several individuals than to the collective experience of beginners.

## The Teachers' Views of Their Preparation

Two themes emerged from the first year teachers' responses to questions about their teacher preparation programs: a realization of the limits of such programs, and a valuing of firsthand experiences. Beyond these two themes, however, there was little consistency from teacher to teacher in their judgments about the adequacy of their preparation.

The new teachers entered their beginning year with an intuitive understanding that teacher education was limited in the extent to which it could prepare them for the realities of teaching. "My teacher training program was good, but so much more was needed that can't be put into a course or a textbook. It is just being out there and doing. I felt as prepared as I could ever be." As the school year progressed, more and more teachers expressed this sentiment. Even those teachers who had had field-based

programs echoed the feeling: "You can never be prepared for the first year of teaching." They believed that certain aspects of teaching reality simply could not be duplicated in teacher education.

Various reasons were given by the teachers for their perceived discrepancy between teacher preparation and teaching. The most compelling was the total responsibility of being a teacher, encountered for the first time in the beginning year. "Until you are there, and until you are the one responsible, you can't really understand what it is like.... In student teaching you are not totally responsible. In the back of your head is the thought that, 'Really, I am not the one down on the books as responsible for these children; my cooperating teacher is.'"

Another reason given was that teacher education could not be expected to prepare each teacher for the uniqueness of his or her first teaching situation. It could only provide the basic knowledge and skills generally required of all teachers. In all likelihood there would be only minimal correspondence between student teaching, their only in-depth encounter with the reality of the classroom, and their first teaching position. They are much like army recruits, who are given basic knowledge, skills, tools and simulated battle experiences in the hope that during the heat of actual battle the interacting variables will result in fight rather than flight.

In spite of their awareness of the shortcomings of professional preparation, including its field experiences, the first year teachers frequently voiced a positive view of their firsthand experiences. This view emerged as the second salient theme in their interview responses. There was a general call for longer periods of student teaching. Some recognized, for example, that to be a part of the ebb and flow of life in the teachers' lounge, or interactions by the office mail boxes for a whole year was as

important as many instructional aspects of classroom life. Indeed, the non-teaching, clerical, and administrative tasks varied between September and June. Some teachers stated the need for field experience at the precise grade level and subject they would be hired to teach. Others, realizing the futility of such a hope under the present structure of teacher education, called for a shotgun approach--widely varying experiences in many settings. There was broad affirmation of the need for field experiences to help test and make sense of knowledge gained from books and classes.

Beyond these two themes--the limitations of teacher education and the valuing of field experience--there was little similarity among teachers in their attitudes toward their preparation. Some teachers held consistently positive attitudes throughout the year; others, consistently negative. Some teachers' feelings about their teacher education improved over the year, while others' feelings grew progressively negative. Some teachers evaluated their programs both positively and negatively over the year, with no apparent pattern. Interestingly, the teachers' attitudes could not be explained by comparing each teacher's judgment with the difficulties he or she encountered in the first year of teaching. In many instances, in spite of great frustration and terribly difficult experiences, the teachers maintained that they had been well prepared. Some others, who had few problems, still thought of their preparation negatively. A weak trend was noted for the teachers to view their professional education more positively at the start of their first year than at the close; however, the dominant impression is of lack of similarity among these teachers in their attitudes toward preparation.

## Conclusion

Of the two themes which emerged from the first year teachers as they spoke of their teacher preparation, one, their need for more field experience, recalls an ancient and honored professional dispute; the other, their recognition of the limitations of preparation programs, holds a poignant message for educators caught up in the sound and fury of teacher training.

This issue of the balance within the teacher education curriculum between theory and practice, between ideas and skills, and between campus-based and field-based teacher education is an old one. The rise of competency-based teacher education and cries for relevance have brought this debate to the floor again. Many teacher educators are convinced by the desires enunciated by the new teachers in our study, and they wish to mold teacher education in a more skill-training and field-oriented direction.

It is our belief that the discussion of the curriculum of teacher education is illuminated by John Dewey, writing seventy-five years ago in the NSSE Yearbook of 1904. Dewey first addressed the complexity of the task confronting the beginning teacher:

> The difficulties which face a beginning teacher, who is set down for the first time before a class of from thirty to sixty children, in the responsibilities not only of instruction, but of maintaining the required order in the room as a whole, are most trying. It is almost impossible for an old teacher who has acquired the requisite skill of doing two or three distinct things simultaneously--skill to see the room as a whole while hearing one individual in one class recite, or keeping the program of the day and, yes, of the week and of the month in the fringe of consciousness while the work of the hour is in its center--it is almost impossible for such a teacher to realize all the difficulties that confront the average beginner.

Dewey's solution to the dilemma was not to suggest more practical skill training or emersion in schools. Rather, he acknowledged the limited time available for teacher training and the economy this limitation forced on teacher trainers. He urged that teacher trainers not give in to their temptation to aim at short-term goals, i.e., mastery of the survival skills such as the techniques of discipline. He urged the teacher education community away from what he called an "apprenticeship training," which he saw as the prevailing model in normal schools and state teacher training institutions. Although Dewey was in favor of field experiences, it had for him a larger purpose than the mastery of the practical. Dewey wanted preservice teachers to use field experiences to become "students of teaching." He wanted the focus to be on educational ideas and principles that organize and illuminate the realities of classroom teaching. He saw it as long-term understanding rather than short-term mastery of practical classroom problems. Dewey believed that there was sufficient time to learn the practicalities once in the school. In contrast, he saw little time in the teacher training curriculum to instill ideas and principles.

Dewey's suggestions for the organization of teacher education are in direct contrast to the teachers in our study, who advocated the field-based and the practical. Only one teacher was favorably disposed to educational theory. The great majority saw practical training in schools and in field-related experiences of immense value. Some who received little of it prior to student teaching were resentful. Whether this craving for practical experience will dissipate as our teachers gain years of experience and mastery of the practical is something we should watch as we follow up these teachers. Nevertheless, choosing between these two opposing points of view will not provide an answer. The roles of theory and practice in learning to teach have yet to be fully understood.

Our focus on the attitudes of our first year teachers toward their teacher preparation programs revealed widespread inconsistencies within the group and within the individuals over time. Their descriptions of their own varying needs brought home to us, again, the immense complexity of the teacher education enterprise. Currently, we develop generalized programs for a generalized pre-service teacher of generalized students in a generalized school. But, in actuality, individual aspirants with different life experiences and very different abilities and characteristics (eg., intelligence, energy level, interpersonal skill) present themselves for training in particular programs which emphasize different concepts and skills, and they are sent, upon graduation, to teach in very particular classrooms with students with widely varying individual needs (from abstract ideas to impulse control) in school settings with very unique characteristics. In effect, we teacher educators are asked to do a highly complex task with few resources and immense constraints and controls placed upon us.

This sense of limitations placed upon teacher educators is one that is rarely reflected in professional literature. We as a professional group try to find new treatments and training packages to develop this or that cluster of skills. We substitute this field experience for that course. And, we tend to do all this with admirable optimism. If the teachers in our study are representative of the majority of teacher education graduates, the people we are preparing seem to understand our limitations much more clearly than we do. As one of our teachers stated, "Well, I think my program prepared me very well because I can see that there is so much they cannot really prepare you for in a teacher education course. I would have to say I was very well prepared."

## Reference

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